Othering or Inclusion: Focusing on a Contemporary Dance Project

with an Ethnic Minority in Japan

Asami Koizumi[+] (Japan)

Abstract

In this paper I will discuss a multicultural art project in an ethnic minority neighborhood in Japan where contemporary dance artist Midori Kurata visited the elderly nursing home residents and created a performance with them. The project was launched by the local government, with the aim of facilitating cultural exchanges including Korean descendants in Higashikujo, Kyoto, Japan. While challenging the social exclusion of ethnic minorities is a major issue in Japanese society, it is also important to consider how the specific culture and heritage of different groups are not consumed by but conveyed to other communities. This art project successfully reflected the ordinary existence of a Higashikujo minority group, which led to a transformation in the expression of the dancing of Kurata, and an understanding of their unique ethnic culture. This paper will present this project's creative process, performance, and its significance for fostering the social inclusion of ethnic minorities among a wider audience in Japan.

Keywords: *Cultural inclusion, Contemporary Dance, Ethnic Minorities, Art Projects*

[+] Asami Koizumi, Graduate School of Literature, Osaka University, Japan. email: asamix.koizumi@gmail.com.

Received 4/22/19 – Accepted 6/8/19

Introduction

This paper will discuss a multicultural art project with old Korean neighborhood called Higashikujo in Japan, where contemporary dance artist Midori Kurata created a dance performance with the elderly residents of a local nursing home. The project was launched by the City of Kyoto, Japan, in an attempt to facilitate cultural exchanges both within and outside the Korean ethnic minority community, and to encourage social inclusion through arts and culture.[1]

While challenging the social exclusion of ethnic minorities is a big issue in Japanese society, it is also important to analyze how the specific cultures of minority groups can be shared with majorities, rather than being extinguished or assimilated. This paper will focus on this point of inquiry. In the art project with elderly ethnic minorities, how did a young, contemporary Japanese artist recognize and celebrate a marginalized culture through performance? In other words, how can an artist collaborate with another ethnic culture using her own artistic techniques?

These questions involve issues of "Othering." Othering is discussed in postcolonial studies and cultural criticism to visualize construction of identities and power between two socioeconomically unequal groups such as male/female, westerner/easterner, white/black, etc. In this paper we will employ the notion of Othering referred to from previous studies about racism and representation to reflect a characteristic of the art project which involves an ethnic minority and their performance.

For example, hooks[2] provides a critique of contemporary films, catalogues, music etc., and reveals how "Otherness" is innocently perceived to offer more pleasurable, exciting, sexual or nostalgic experience that majorities do not have.

> They claim the body of the colored Other instrumentally, as unexplored terrain, a symbolic frontier that will be fertile ground for their reconstruction of masculine norm, for asserting themselves as transgressive desiring subjects. They call upon the Other to be both witness and participant in this transformation.[3]

She analyses otherness as a structure of racism by white male culture but her analysis is common to our majority issues.

> Concurrently, marginalized groups, deemed Other, who have been ignored, rendered invisible, can be seduced by the emphasis on Otherness, by its commodification, because it offers the promise of recognition and reconciliation. […] The acknowledged Other must assume recognizable forms.[4]

She defines that situation as "Eating the Other" which helps the majority to produce images of the Other to satisfy their desire for experiencing difference or touching taboos in their norms without losing their position as a subjective majority. Then she states eating the Other eases their sense of lacked identity and is based on denial of imperialism, racial domination which has in fact deformed the Other's culture.

Performances which aim for creating multicultural settings on stage might eat the Other. According to one critique, in a performance project with indigenous performers such as the Maori and the Kanak, Japanese dancers and a French choreographer demonstrate that the performance can emphasize Otherness through the disposition of performers. In the middle of the creation process they presented an ongoing piece where the performers were grouped by ethnicity or region on stage. The critic says the arrangement emphasizes their physical and cultural differences such as skin color, gestures, language and clothing.[5] If such emphasis on differences simply reflects our divided situation, the artist would create dynamics of differentiation which can be called "Othering" marginalized people. Then it would force the audience to indulge in a fantasy toward the Other without any reflection on their colonial background or the issues of creating a multicultural society. The audience recognizes solely stereotypical images of the Other and subsumes them.

This paper will use the term "Othering" as a dynamic process to differentiate minorities and realize the desired Otherness of the majorities. Even if a project aims for inclusion or coexistence, the performance structure might still Other or consume the culture of the minority participants. Thus, the critical notion of Othering can shed new light on evaluating the effectiveness and impacts of collaborative art projects with ethnic minorities.

This art project was conducted in an old Korean neighborhood and successfully showcased in the performance the ordinary living conditions of the residents. This paper describes the process of the project, specifically the artist's recognition of the culture of the elderly Korean residents of Higashikujo without Othering them. Then, we will verify if the recognition is adequately reflected in the performance using the artist's dance techniques. In conclusion, this study discusses how the performance encouraged citizens to engage in a social inclusion that carries a perceptible change in attitudes toward ethnic minorities in Japan.

Target Area: Higashikujo, Kyoto

A neighborhood called Higashikujo (see Figure 1) is located in the south-east section of Kyoto station, along the Kamo river. Higashikujo has the highest population of elderly Korean residents (the descendants of Korean people)[6] in the City of Kyoto, and historically, before and after World War II, the local government and citizens of Kyoto treated the community in a discriminatory way. Although the Korean residents in the neighborhood often contributed to the local urban development, those who live along the banks of Kamo river had no basic infrastructure, such as water lines or a sewage system, until the late 1980's.[7]

Although the local administration had ignored the discrimination in Higashikujo, various communities in Higashikujo have welcomed socially vulnerable people, and used strong civil activism to establish a better and more normal life. One example of this is the multicultural festival called "Higashikujo Madan." "Madan" means "plaza" in Korean, and communities in the neighborhood, including Korean, Japanese, disabled, elderly, marginalized, etc., actively participate and interact in the festival. They exhibit paintings and engage in performances such as ethnic

dances and Korean style dramas, which reflect the history of Korean immigrants in Japan. Each group that takes part in the festival either sells food or promotes their activity using posters.[8] The festival is held every autumn and is open to visitors outside of Higashikujo.

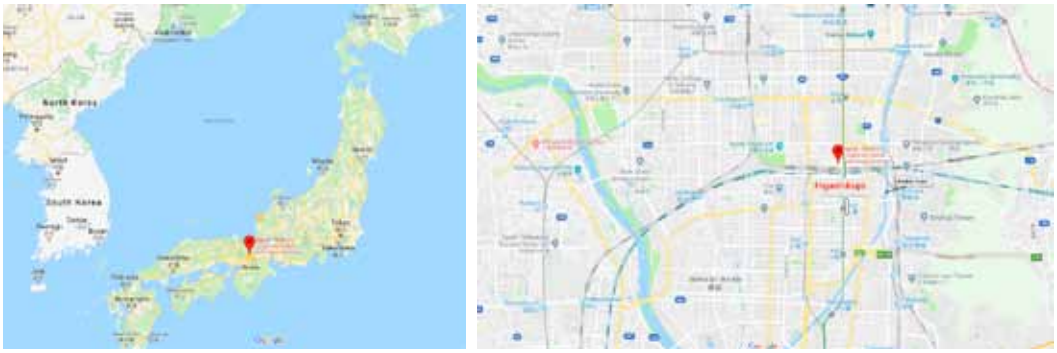

Figure 1. Location of neighborhood called Higashikujo, Kyoto.

Although the living environment has been improved through community activism, Higashikujo now has a high percentage of aging people because the young and middle-aged families are decreasing with the overall decline of the population in the district (less than 2000 people in 2015). Figure 2 below displays changes in population in the neighborhood based on age. In the middle of the graph, the bars represent the changes in population among 15- to 65-year-olds. From 2000 to 2015, the population of young people shows a decline. However, the population of those over 65 years has remained mostly unchanged. This trend is remarkable in the eastern part of Higashikujo, where the rate of aging increased to 41.1% in 2015.[9]

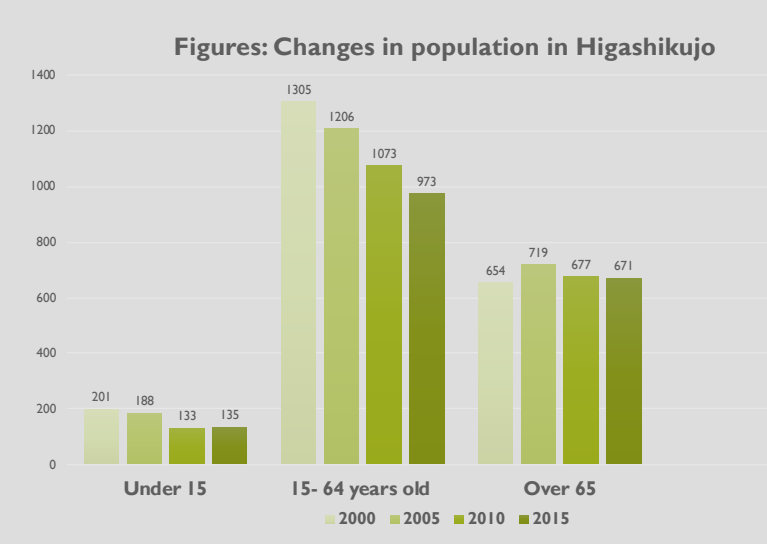

Figure 2. Changes in population of Higashikujo.

Since 2017, the City of Kyoto has reinvested in Higashikujo to revitalize the neighborhood. This is because the Agency for Cultural Affairs of Japan is being

transferred from Tokyo to Kyoto. The agency has supported artists and art organizations and now aims to promote social inclusion with arts and culture. Consequently, local government officials planned to utilize the potential of the arts and young residents to solve the problem of age-related population decline in Higashikujo. As part of the investment plan of the local government, in the western area of Higashikujo, new institutions have been invited to strengthen urban vitality. In the eastern area, where the rate of aging is the highest in the neighborhood, the government is trying to create art projects and creative environments. The entire neighborhood is planned in such a manner as to comprise a larger proportion of young residents. Kyoto City University of Arts will also be transferring to nearby Higashikujo.[10]

The Arts and Cultural section of the Kyoto City government has also begun social inclusion art projects with organizations which support the vulnerable. One of the projects, titled "Multicultural Project with the Elderly in Higashikujo," was recently begun in the neighborhood. The Kokyonoie-Kyoto nursing home in the eastern part of Higashikujo agreed to collaborate with the project team, and welcomed the artist, Midori Kurata.

Kokyonoie-Kyoto means "old home in Kyoto" in Japanese, and it also represents the mission of the home. Kokyonoie-Kyoto combines aspects of both Korean and Japanese culture to provide residents with a safe and comfortable place to live. Residents of the home are mostly older Koreans, first or second generation (Issei or Nisei in Japanese) immigrants from Korea, or those who have lived in the neighborhood for a long time. The home invites local community members so that the elderly can listen and enjoy Korean musical performances. They also conduct seasonal rituals and customs from both Korean and Japanese traditions.

The art project in the Kokyonoie-Kyoto nursing home in Higashikujo took place from June 6, 2017, to March 3, 2018. During the project, contemporary dance artist Midori Kurata visited the homes in the neighborhood and held conversations with the elderly there. Together, they planned to hold the performance in the hall of the nursing home.

The performance was conducted after dialogue and exchanges between the artist and the residents of the home, as well as members of the community. The project was first performed in January 2018 in front of the residents, caregivers in the home, and residents in the neighborhood. Then a greater public audience was invited for a second performance of the same day.

The performance presented improvised dialogue of Kurata with each of the elderly, a young Japanese-Korean caregiver and a city office worker on stage. There was an archival footage of Kurata's community visits projected on stage which helped the audience to understand the performers' backgrounds and their exchanges with Kurata. Then the artist performed a dance which had different forms depending on the performers in front of her because she danced as a response to each performer and memory of dialogue. After the project was concluded, Kurata

obtained grants from the public hall to recreate the performance, and it was presented to citizens in February 2019.

The following methodology will be used to describe how the performance was created with significant influence from exchange and dialogue among the artists and the residents.

Methodology for Documentation

Some critics of art projects suggest that there are certain methods of documenting and researching art projects. Critic Pablo Helguera[11] specializes in socially engaged art projects, and he advises that documentation and research of socially engaged art reflect its ambiguous features between art and social or political practices. Another critic, Grant Kester,[12] claims that the evaluation of art projects in which various participants engage in collaborative practices needs to be analyzed using cross-disciplinary studies in ethnography or social science, etc. To faithfully capture the process of this project, the author engaged in field research of the project and conducted interviews with a variety of subjects, including Midori Kurata, a researcher involved in publishing a public report about the project named Wataru Sugawa, and a section manager of the Kokyonoie-Kyoto nursing home.

Kester reveals that the artists who conduct collaborative practices of art projects "identify various dialogical *processes* as integral to the content of work" and challenge the autonomy of authorship in conventional art criticism.[13]

Therefore, this paper focuses on the process of dialogues and exchanges between the artist and the elderly residents in the nursing home. The methods include observing the artists' change in dance expression in front of the elderly, as well as her off-stage comments on the situation to measure her recognition of the cultures of the old Korean community. We then analyzed her performance in 2018, from which we were able to observe a reflection of the processes of the project. Finally, this paper evaluates the art project in terms of the artists' expressions, rather than from the point of view of arts management, which is another significant topic to be discussed in a later work.

Towards the end of this paper, we will observe how the project offers suggestions for encountering and collaborating with cultures of ethnic minorities in Japan without Othering them.

Process of Dialogues with the Elderly

This section will recount and document the art project using public reports by the City of Kyoto, as well as participatory observation research by the author of this paper.

During the project, Kurata confessed that she felt responsibility or a burden to know the history of Higashikujo when she wanted to create something in the neighborhood. She was afraid to objectify and consume their culture. Kurata started to learn the local history by visiting the residents who knew the neighbor-

hood well, and by watching archival footage of the district, with the assistance of the government coordinators of the project. She also learned some ethnic dances that had been practiced there.

As Kurata tried to comprehend the history of Higashikujo, she became overwhelmed by the history, and felt distant from their culture, especially the preferences of the residents in the nursing home. For example, they preferred old Japanese songs and enjoyed performances of Korean traditional music and dance. Kurata felt, at first, that she would create the performance solely based on their preferences because her usual works of contemporary dance are distinct from popular entertainment and are designed to provoke social consciousness. At that point, she was wondering if the subject of the performance at the end of the project would be similar to her other contemporary dance stage performances, or if the performance would not have a contemporary dance feature but instead reflect the popular tastes of the elderly in Higashikujo.

Gradually, Kurata recognized the residents' attitudes, which reveals their culture is not represented solely by Korean ethnicity and its history. In the nursing home, many of the residents had dementia, but they still welcomed anyone who spoke to them. In this manner, Kurata was also welcomed by the elderly residents. A care supporter whom Kurata visited to understand the Higashikujo expressed the feature of the neighborhood as below.

> Various groups of people engage in the neighborhood in their own way. They are inclusive as well as conservative because of the history of exclusion. They don't care about social backgrounds and just ask you who you are.[14]

The community of the residents in the nursing home also embodies the character of the neighborhood, that is by degrees recognized by Kurata through her engagement with them through her dance.

When they were in front of the artist, residents in the nursing home asked her "Where do you come from?" or "What do you do?" They didn't intend to evaluate whether she was a member of the community or if she knew its history well. Rather, they were just curious about Kurata who looked like just a young girl to them. Kurata introduced herself to them as a dancer from Mie prefecture outside of Kyoto. The elderly residents then said "Then let me see you dance," so she danced in front of them.

In fact, the dance Kurata performed was not the same as the one she often uses as a contemporary dance artist. She performed ballet for the Kokyonoie-Kyoto nursing home residents, a style that she had abandoned when she started her career as a contemporary dancer. When she finished the ballet, the elderly residents gave her such lengthy cheers and applause that the artist felt surprised by their positive response.

Kurata often told the project team "I can't dance to entertain people using ballet." From this paradoxical comment, we can see how she naturally responded to the elderly in Higashikujo through her ballet performance, but afterwards, she still remained unconvinced of her attitudes toward entertaining through ballet.

Since many of the elderly had dementia, Kurata kept reintroducing herself to them, and kept performing dances to their favorite old Japanese popular songs or their Korean traditional instrumental music. According to an interview with the author (March 20, 2019),[15] she chose ballet-style dance because "My classic ballet has pleased my grandpa, grandma, mom and dad" and she felt this time that "It is a common and proper way to respond to the elderly." From this comment we can surmise that her ballet became a communication tool for spending an ordinarily pleasant time together with the residents in the nursing home, and that her attitudes to dancing ballet were a response that was originally triggered by the curiosity and warm feelings toward a stranger expressed by the elderly of the home.

In other words, Kurata comprehended the particular culture of the residents' community was represented in individual attitudes. Then her comprehension was reflected in the change in her dance expression. Thus, she concluded that her ballet in the nursing home was not merely a style of dance she had learned, but was somehow an improvisational dance affected by the community atmosphere.

The recognition of the community's particular culture and her changes in expression were unexpected by Kurata and they inspired her to create her performance. She came to understand that the culture of Higashikujo is not necessarily narrated in terms of past colonial history or the Korean ethnic music and dance which the residents of the nursing home prefer. Rather, the community members embody a unique culture when they engage with outsiders of the community (in this project Kurata is an outsider). Being aware of this invisible culture, she decided to stand on stage with them and present her change of expression in an improvisational way.

As described below, her awareness of the cultural aspects embodied in the residents of the nursing home came to form the core of Kurata's performance. What is more, she requested some people involved in the project to perform on stage with her. Her experience of expressive change which occurred through interaction with the residents in the home was applied to the task at hand and she used her responsiveness as an improvisational dance technique to engage with other performers on stage.

Analysis of Performance and Discussion

This section will analyze the actual performance conducted in 2018. In her performance titled "Hello, Nice to Meet You, Who Am I Now?" the subject of performance is each person the artist met throughout the course of the project.

The audience is able to view Kurata's visits to the community on archival footage projected at the back of the stage. When a resident of the home in wheelchair appears on stage, he is followed by a caregiver; Kurata also faces him, bending on her knees to make eye contact with him. She exchanges dialogues with him, even though he does not understand he is performing on stage; as usual, she introduces herself and starts dancing ballet in an improvisational way. The wheelchair-bound resident probably forgot Kurata because of his dementia, but their solid pace of interaction and dialogue signifies the relationship that they built throughout the project.

In another scene, Kurata appeared with a young member of the neighborhood who works as a caregiver for the elderly and who became a friend of hers. Kurata listens to some lines delivered by this friend in Korean, although other lines about the friend's anxiety or customs in her ordinary life are expressed in Japanese. After the scene, Kurata starts another improvisational dance which is more abstract than the ballet that she performed earlier.

A similar scene plays out when a city office worker of the art project appears on stage. At this point Kurata gradually bends her back and lies down powerlessly to the floor, because she might not want to hear his hesitation or doubt if he "includes", takes care of his family well. Relative changes in Kurata's expression are observed when she dances in front of the elderly and other people on stage.

Here, we see the performance was structured not to Other particular minorities but to concentrate on individual differences. When the artist delivered her dialogue with each individual on stage and presented improvisational dance, it highlighted the individual character of the performers. The elderly Korean responded to her dance in his own unique way which was similar to the exchanges they made in the nursing home described in the previous section. His behavior challenges our image of minorities socially deemed the Other.

All the performers were empowered to express freely how they would speak to, face, and interact with Kurata. This is partly because Kurata chose the subject of dialogue or her improvisational dance which is "a common and proper way to respond" in the same way as she experienced with the residents of the nursing home. Such performers' expressions brought to light their personality. It is this individual attitude of the performer toward engaging with the world which is invisible when we put individuals together into social groups and commence a discourse on "Ethnicity" or "Social Class." Othering might occur while ignoring individual differences.

Kurata, on the contrary, successfully conveyed the presence of each individual. The performance can be perceived as communicating the challenge we face when we get to know people individually, transcending our tendency to label people in a socially conventional manner. That is why this performance has been highly evaluated in achieving the project's aim of fostering social inclusion through the art project.

Kurata left comments about what she experienced during the project in the pamphlet of the performance. "I myself am included among them," she remarked. Kurata added footage of a conversation with another member of Higashikujo in the second performance in the public hall, stating, "I thought I would not be welcomed here [Higashikujo] if I didn't know much about their history when I agreed to commit to the project. Still I came to know that it doesn't matter for the residents here." Her observations ensured that her performance was based on her experience of the culture in the residents' community which included the artist, who used to be an outsider of Higashikujo. The project didn't Other or exclude the culture of the marginalized people because it proceeded through the direct engagement of the artist to encounter individuals living in the neighborhood.

Figure 3. Dialogue with Kurata and the nursing home resident on stage in February 2019 performance (photo by Kai Maetani).

Figure 4. Dialogue with the city office worker and improvisational dance by Kurata on stage in February 2019 performance (photo by Kai Maetani).

Figure 5. All performers appeared on stage for curtain call in a February 2019 performance (photo by Kai Maetani).

Conclusion

From these points of observation, we can see that Kurata got the idea of the performance from the experiences with the elderly residents who welcomed her, and that she utilized improvisational dance as a communication tool. As mentioned above, residents' attitudes are rooted in the culture of Higashikujo, where they have struggled with exclusion from the majority group in Japan.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that an artist influenced by an inclusive experience in the residents' community did not Other a particular history or culture in Higashikujo, but chose improvisational dialogue and dance to strengthen and visualize the influence of the community on the artist. If she had not noticed their dialogical and welcoming culture, she could not have succeeded in the project.

In addition, the project suggests the following issues of significance in the performance for both audience and citizens.

1. The performance visualized the embodied elderly as not a passive participant but as a unique and influential agent;
2. The performance showed multiple forms of engagement with ethnic minorities, in this case, the Korean minority groups in Japan;
3. As the performance lacked a stereotypical representation of older Koreans in Japan, it also raised questions about Japanese citizens' perceptions of Otherness.

In the future, it is possible that the performance will be performed again on stage, or be shown through archival video, so the art project has the efficacy of being used to spur incremental change in the cultural perceptions of minority groups in Japan, and of playing a part in helping to create a more multicultural and inclusive society.

Endnotes

1 In this study, we refer to Higashikujo as a neighborhood and not as a community. This is because the entire district is not a community of Korean residents, but has various communities of/ for the vulnerable depending on core aims. If the author uses the word "community", it will represent the community of the elderly in the nursing home in Higashikujo with which the artist engaged mostly.

2 Bell Hooks, *Black Looks* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 21-39.

3 Bell Hooks, *Black Looks*, 24.

4 Bell Hooks, *Black Looks*, 26.

5 Takashima Megumi, "Community called 'PACIFIKMELTINGPOT' aiming for polyphonic and inclusive time and space" In *Voyage of the Proprioception Régine Chopinot and PACIFIKMELTINGPOT,* ed. Tomita Daisuke (Osaka: Osaka University Press, 2017), 28-41.

6 The number of foreigners in Japan is statistically collected by the Ministry of Justice. The population of Koreans who have South and North Korea nationality in Japan is 322,447 (in June, 2018), which is the second highest number following the Chinese. 67% among them have status of residence that prove they came to Japan before W.W.II or are the descendants of those who did. The previous statistics do not include the number who naturalize to Japanese.

7 Ishikawa Kuniko, *Community Practice in Mutual Disadvantaged Areas: With a Focus on Higashikujo, Kyoto,* (PhD diss., Kwansei Gakuin University, 2013), 137.
– Yamamoto Takanori, "Conditions of Residents Movement in a Squatter Area: The Case of Higashi-Kujo in Kyoto City," *The Annals of Japan Association for Urban Sociology,* 27, (2009): 61-76.

8 "What is Higashikujo Madan," Higashikujo Madan, accessed April 9, 2019.

9 Statistics including the figure are cited from *Kyoto city, Revitalization Policy for Southeast Area of Kyoto Station* (Kyoto 2017), 8-9.

10 Kyoto city, Revitalization policy for southeast area of Kyoto station.

11 Pablo Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook* (New York : Jorge Pinto Books, 2011), 3-8.

12 Grant H. Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 8-17.

13 Kester, *The One and the Many,* 10.

14 Sugawa Wataru, "A Model for Fostering Social Inclusion by Arts and Culture: A Multicultural Project," In *Kyoto City Public Report Model Projects for Revitalizing Citizen by Arts and Culture* (Kyoto, 2018),121.

15 Kurata Midori. Interview by Asami Koizumi. Tape recording. Kyoto City, March 20, 2019.

References

Google Maps. "Kyoto station" www.google.co.jp/maps/@34.9814056,135.7546349,13.85z and www.google.co.jp/maps/search/Kyoto+Station,+Higashishiokoji+Kamadonocho,+Shimogyo+Ward,+Kyoto,+Kyoto/@37.9908065,137.9684662,5.86z (accessed June 7, 2019).

Helguera, Pablo. *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook*. New York: Jorge Pinto Books, 2011.

Hooks, Bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston: South End Press, 1992. 21-39.

Ishikawa, Kuniko. *Community Practice in Mutual Disadvantages Area: With a Focus on Higashikujo, Kyoto.* PhD diss., Kwansei Gakuin University, 2013.

Kester, Grant H. *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham and London: Duke University Press), 2011, 8-17, 28.

Kurata, Midori. Interview by Asami Koizumi. Exchange Email. September 25, 2018.

Kurata, Midori. Interview by Asami Koizumi. Tape recording. Kyoto City, March 20, 2019.

Ministry of Justice. "Foreigners, by Nationality and Status of Residence." June 2018. www.e-stat.go.jp/stat-search/files?npage=1&layout=datalist&toukei=00250012&tstat=000001018034&cycle=1&year=20180&month=12040606&tclass1=000001060399&stat_infid=000031770316, (accessed June 2, 2019).

Sugawa, Wataru. "A Model for Fostering Social Inclusion by Arts and Culture: A Multicultural Project," In *Kyoto City Public Report Model Projects for Revitalizing Citizen by Arts and Culture*. Kyoto, 2018, 114-137.

Takashima, Megumi. "Community Called 'PACIFIKMELTINGPOT' Aiming for Polyphonic and Inclusive Time and Space" In *Voyage of the Proprioception Régine Chopinot and PACIFIKMELTINGPOT*, ed. Tomita Daisuke. Osaka: Osaka University Press, 2017, 28-41.

The City of Kyoto. *Revitalization Policy for Southeast Area of Kyoto Station*. Kyoto 2017.

Higashikujo, Madan "What is Higashikujo Madan," www.h-madang.com/%E6%9D%B1%E4%B9%9D%E6%9D%A1%E3%83%9E%E3%83%80%E3%83%B3%E3%81%A8%E3%81%AF (accessed April 9, 2019).

Yamamoto, Takanori. "Conditions of Residents Movement in a Squatter Area: The Case of Higashi-Kujo in Kyoto City," *The Annals of Japan Association for Urban Sociology,* 27, (2009): 61-76.